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AUTHOR Hawes, Joseph M.
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ABSTRACT

The impact of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration on American children from the 1850's to the 1920's is examined. Specifically, child labor, schooling, growing up female in the industrial age, the juvenile justice system, and dependent children are discussed. Before 1900, child protection in all its manifestations was an informal affair handled by the local community through the families concerned. After the turn of the century professionals took over and institutions appeared. Schools inculcated appropriate social values, especially among the children of immigrants; reformatories re-formed the characters of wayward young people; and orphanages replaced lost families. But these simple approaches did not stem the rising tide of social misery suffered by children, and so during the Progressive era the entire system was transformed. The results included a remaking of the schools, the professionalization of social work, the founding of the juvenile court, the creation of a federal Children's Bureau, the definition and virtual elimination of a new social problem--child labor--and the emergence of national concern about the lives of future citizens. (RM)

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THE IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON AMERICAN CHILDREN

JOSEPH M. HAWES

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Southwestern Social Science Association
(62nd, Forth Worth, TX, March 4, 1984)

Introduction

I plan to examine the impact of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration on American children and consider five themes: child labor, schooling, girls, the juvenile justice system, and dependent children. I have chosen these topics because they are the dominant themes in the period between the middle of the nineteenth century and the end of the second decade of the twentieth century. I might have addressed such topics as child-rearing practices, images of children in popular literature and in the emerging social science of the period, or parent-child relations including child abuse and incest. My colleagues have or will have touched on these topics in their papers and they are an important part of the parent work for this and other papers on this session, The History of Childhood in America.

I need to express my particular appreciation for the chapters by Priscilla Clement, Ronald Cohen, Selma Berrol, and Ruth Boylan upon which my remarks are most extensively based. I have added a point or two here and there from my own work and research, but the bulk of what I have to

SO 015 649

say comes from my reading of those chapters. They cover the chronological period from about 1870 to about 1920. In talking about the themes just mentioned I will stray beyond those limits occasionally as necessary, but those are the boundaries I intend to keep.

I have two purposes: to explain what American children were doing in the period and why it was important and also to describe some of the recent literature on the history of American childhood. I will focus on the activities of the children and bring in the literature where it seems appropriate. For your convenience, however, I have some copies of the bibliography for my paper, which you can pick up after the session.

General Observations

One of the basic historical questions for this period is why did some groups succeed in moving up the social ladder more rapidly than other groups. This is not a new question, but there have been a variety of answers. For example, the famous "Moynihan Report"[1] placed the blame for the failure of blacks to advance on the institution of slavery and its damaging impact on black family life. More recent scholarship, however, suggests that there are two basic characteristics necessary for a group to improve their lot in society. The first is what Robert Wells

has called a "modern outlook on life"[2] which means that families have a more optimistic view of their chances in an urban, cash-based economy and that they believe that the individual is important in his own right--they weren't ready to extend this idea to women during the nineteenth century. The second flows from the first; the family now sacrifices its present goals for the future benefit of individual members. This reverses the traditional pattern whereby individuals give up their desires for independence and the like for the sake of the families gain.[3] For example, as Selma Berrol notes, "Slavic families, like Italians, emphasized sharing and work for the common good, not for individual success. As a result, the family's needs took precedence over the wishes of any child in it."[4]

This question is directly related to two of the themes I wish to discuss--child labor and schooling. In general if children must work instead of going to school their chances of getting ahead are lessened in the long run. Likewise starting school earlier and staying in school longer would provide greater chances for upward mobility. As we will see, however, the situation was not quite that simple.

Child Labor

The first point to make is that Americans did not regard child labor as a problem until the late nineteenth century. In the traditional pre-industrial world children began to work as soon as they were able(usually around age 7) and continued to "work" until they were physically incapacitated in old age. Work was different in that world it meant something like continuous toil for survival not a "job" and it certainly included children. The process of labeling work by children as a problem began when, for middle class urban families, work and the home became separated beginning roughly in the early nineteenth century. At that time schooling was still a fairly haphazard affair with irregular terms, irregular attendance and what Joseph Kett has called "a promiscuous mingling of ages"[5] With the founding of urban school systems and the definition of middle class children in terms of their not working, child labor became first a rural and working class phenomenon and later a social problem for all.

It is a commonplace to say that the real solution to the child labor problem was the enactment of compulsory school attendance laws, but it was the tasks the schools themselves were supposed to perform that made child labor a social problem in the first place. As we shall see what the schools were supposed to accomplish required the presence of working class children. The absence of those children from school in the work-place frustrated the "social reform" and "social control" purposes of the schools.

In the period after the Civil War with the waves of new immigrants according to Selma Berrol, it became clear that "every immigrant group, although not every family in the group depended on their children's labor in their early years in America." Thus to many concerned middle class citizens it seemed that their pre-war efforts to raise the working classes--the"perishing and dangerous classes"[6]--to middle class ideals was now going for nought with the onslaught of millions of "peasants" with their pre-industrial patterns of life and of which child labor was the salient example.

As we have seen immigrant and working class families typically relied on their children's labor. But as time went on the pattern shifted. "Until an immigrant family achieved some economic security," Selma Berrol writes, "the children in that family had to go to work and not to school. In practice this usually meant that younger children received more schooling than their older siblings."[7]

In 1904 earnest middle class reformers created the National Child Labor Committee to agitate for legislation regulating child labor. It now remained for them to find ways of addressing this problem. They set about demonstrating the evils of child labor by showing that children worked in dangerous places such as mines and factories and that they worked in morally threatening environments such as vice districts--even inside such nefarious places as bordellos, saloons, and gambling dens. Their solution was a federal law, the Keating Owen Act of 1916, which as

many of you know was later declared unconstitutional.

Even though the Supreme Court did declare the child labor law unconstitutional[8] the participation of children in the work force declined substantially in the early twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1920 the percentage of fourteen to eighteen-year-old males in the work-force dropped from 43 to 23, while high school enrollment rose from 8 to 44 percent for the same age group. For females the drop was from 18 to 11.[9] This decline in work force participation undoubtedly owed a great deal to the rise of compulsory school attendance laws, but as Miriam Cohen notes: "adequate enforcement of child labor and compulsory school attendance laws would have had disastrous consequences for the schools. Even as large a public school system as New York was not adequate to accommodate all the children to the rapidly growing city."[10]

In spite of the impressive figures showing a decline in child labor and a rise in school attendance on the part of children and youth in the twentieth century the progressives did not "solve" the problem of child labor. Still they defined the problem and began the emphasis on universal schooling which is so much a part of our expectations today.

Schooling

By the middle of the nineteenth century there were schools throughout the country. For the most part these schools had been established because of the waves of new immigrants and because of the growing perception that schools should be publicly funded. They were defended on the grounds that they made democracy possible and supported on the grounds that they would protect property and reduce crime by giving the poor a chance to better themselves by learning new trades. Thus to the reformers and to the students themselves the schools represented an opportunity for personal advancement. To the conservative elites and those who worried about Irish and German immigrants in the first half of the nineteenth century the schools seemed a good way to teach foreign-born children the central elements of republican virtue.

Before the progressive era and despite the public statements of Horace Mann and other school reformers, according to Priscilla Clement:

> Since most children left urban public schools at such an early age to work, the little schooling they had by then acquired probably did not serve them in any significant way for the jobs they took. Nineteenth-century schools gave most children elementary training in language and mathematics and little else. They learned work skills on the job.[11]

Thus the relationship between schools and the social mobility they supposedly promised was imperfect. Attendance, it seemed, was highly correlated with the affluence of the family. So schools did help those who could afford to stay in them, but those who needed them most could

least afford to stay in school long enough to move up the social ladder.

To use Lawrence Cremin's apt title the Progressive Era saw a "Transformation of the School". This transformation changed not only what went on in schools but the whole social meaning of schools in American life. According to Paul Violas there were seven innovations in the schools during the progressive era:

1. compulsory school attendance
2. Americanization
3. the play movement
4. student extracurricular activities
5. vocational training
6. vocational guidance
7. emergence of professional school administrators

The changes Paul Violas notes meant that the schools now had a different job to do and a different basis for doing that job. Earlier the schools had rested on a kind of public moral order--the idea that foreign born children had to be instructed in the virtues and necessities of republican citizenship. Now "the school's major function," Marvin Lazerson writes, became "the fitting of the individual into the economy. By the teaching of specific skills and behavior patterns, schools would produce better and more efficient workers and citizens and they would do this through a process of selection and guidance."[12] Others, notably

Bowles and Gintis, would take the argument a step further and contend that the urban school reform movement was essentially one for more efficient social control. "The essence of progressiviam in education," they write was "the rationalization of the process of reproducing the social classes of modern industrial life."[13] They argue that the capitalist elite was not interested in promoting equality because the system depended upon inequalities to make it work.

What made the transformation more striking, however was the new reliance upon "science" as the basis for making public policy, particularly school policy. In a study of truant officers Tyack and Berkowitz observe that "some social investigators were still censuring parents and children and waxing lyrical about the corrupting influence of poolrooms and dance halls. But the language of diagnosis was shifting from moral judgments about character to social scientific terminology, from 'vice' to 'maladjustment.'"[14]

Other changes could be quickly noted. The high school appeared in the late nineteenth century and had become standard by the end of the period. In 1890 there were 203,000 student enrolled in high schools (a majority of whom were girls) and by 1920 high school enrollment had mushroomed to 2.2 million. This increase in high school enrollment meant that work in American society had become increasingly specialized and that preparation to enter the work--especially the more desirable white collar work required young people to stay in school much longer. The

Progressive Era might be called the Professional Era as salaried workers replaced volunteers and as business and industry rationalized their operations and as many of these new occupations sought the enhanced social prestige of "professionalism". This in turn placed greater emphasis on schools and the need for a longer preparation period.[15]

Growing Up Female in the Industrial Age

Many of the points already made and yet to be made apply with equal force to both male and female children. Still there were some substantially different effects of modernization. Girls, even though there is strong evidence to suggest that they desired individual autonomy every bit as much as boys, found that they did not have the same opportunities for advancement and personal improvement as did their brothers. While the cult of individualism which was so much a part of American life energized thousands of young men in the early nineteenth century, young women found that their efforts to claim a place in society proved ironic. They were, for all practical purposes, systematically excluded from the avenues of advancement and confined on the one hand to domestic matters or to work that did not even provide full support.

The explanation for this lies in the history of middle class women

in nineteenth-century America. For our purposes the most significant development was the rise of the "Cult of Domesticity," which expected mothers to provide their children with a moral education adequate for a republican citizen. Since mothers had to teach their children republican virtue, girls as well as boys had to be educated. Boys, presumably were to make use of school as a stepping stone up the social ladder. Girls, by contrast, were to make use of their education in rearing children inside the home.[16]

In his famous report on manufactures Alexander Hamilton had suggested that women and children might profitably be employed in factories since they were mostly idle and potential troublemakers. As everyone knows, the first factory workers in the United States were young women. The popular image was that they came from impoverished farms and worked to help support their families. Theirs was but another typical example of female sacrifice for the benefit of the family. But Thomas Dublin argues otherwise. Most of the young women who worked in the factories of New England did so because of the independence it provided them, thus demonstrating that the urge for autonomy was as important to girls as to boys.[17]

In the early years the factory owners took care to provide an appropriately sheltered environment for their female employees. But those young women who went to the city rather than to the factory town found themselves under no protection. The jobs they could find--domestic

service being one of the most common--frequently paid wages lower than what it took to survive. As a result many of these young women turned to part-time prostitution as a means of surviving in the city.[18]

The Juvenile Justice System

One of the reasons given for the appearance of the juvenile reformatories in the early nineteenth century was that they could protect young people from the temptations of the city. (Indeed the very first, founded in New York in 1825, was called "the House of Refuge"). Presumably the institutions would save boys from the evil temptations of the girls who were driven by economic circumstances to become prostitutes. Girls would be saved from the error of seeking survival by immoral means.

Juvenile jails appeared well before the Civil War but their great heyday was in the last third of the nineteenth century as reformers built more of them and tampered in various ways with their internal workings. The theory behind them and behind other systems--Charles Loring Brace's placing out system the probation system developed in Massachusetts by John Augustus and various apprenticeship systems--was that by dealing with youthful crime one could prevent the twin adult sins of crime and

pauperism. (The two were equivalent in the minds of nineteenth century social thinkers and had a common cause--the failure of society and the family to form a child's character. Thus that character had to be re-formed.)[19]

Boys would be saved from a life of crime by learning a useful trade which they could use to support themselves. Girls presumably would learn the error of their ways and go and sin no more. Typically girls found themselves more frequently incarcerated for sexual sins rather than for crimes. As Boylan notes, "the appearance of houses of refuge , orphanages, and later, industrial and reform schools signaled an adult willingness to treat girls differently from women if they ran afoul of the law and to provide protection for orphaned or neglected girls." When girls emerged from these institutions they found that they had suffered more than the founders had probably intended. According to Boylan,

> the troublesome nineteenth-century girl might find herself removed from her family, forbidden to contact family members, placed in an institution, and eventually apprenticed as a servant to a new family in an unfamiliar locality. Passing through such institutions seems generally to have doomed girls to marginal lives with few opportunities for social or educational mobility.[20]

One of the more unusual findings in recent literature is that crime decreased among adult males in the United States after the Civil War but increased among females and juveniles. One of the primary reasons for this was the rise of immigration from central and southern Europe in the

latter decades of the nineteenth century. Children from different cultures found themselves in trouble with the law because they did not urdrstand the mores of American society. Thus, the juvenile justice system, like the schools, came to be an agent for the assimilation of immigrant children into American life.[21]

In the 1890s reformers reviewed and revised the juvenile justice system, creating the juvenile court in the process. The progressives who led these reforms--people like Ben Lindsey of Denver--claimed great possibilities for them and espoused high ideals of child-saving. But the courts never lived up to their early promise. Studies by Anthony Platt, Robert Mennel, and Steven Schlossman indicate that the juvenile court served primarily as an agent of social control. A disproportionate number of immigrant children came before the court, and the court failed to reduce the rates of incarceration. In addition girls were more likely to be incarcerated than boys and they had longer sentences. According to Steven Schlossman and Stephanie Wallach this amounted to a kind of enforced chastity. [22]

Like the movement to save dependent and neglected children the juvenile reform crusade of the progressive era failed to live up to its high ideals. It failed because the motives of the founders were mixed, because the task set for the juvenile justice system was too great for the resources allocated to it and because the people who staffed the system were mediocre at best.[23]

Dependent Children

In the early part of the nineteenth century few officials made much of a distinction between dependent and delinquent children. Both had similar problems--they were people of no family or people for whom their families had failed. Both represented threats to the future because they might grow up without a skill or trade and would thus have to rely on some non-productive activity to support themselves. Thus the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in New York resolved itself into the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents without changing its purpose and Charles Loring Brace, as we have seen, could refer to all who fell into the category of unemployed and unskilled as "the perishing and dangerous classes" whether criminal or not.[24]

The rise of nineteenth century cities increased the numbers of children who fell into this category dramatically. As Priscilla Clement explains,

> for some children in the late nineteenth-century city, family ties were entirely dissolved. Parents died or deserted these youngsters or simply could not afford to support them. Such children created a very real and visible problem. They lived in the streets, slept out on park benches or in gutters, committed petty thefts in order to survive. . . . Consequently, to deal with the problems of poverty, dependency

> and delinquency among urban youth in the late nineteenth-century city, many social welfare agencies that had long been in existence stepped up their activities, and concerned philanthropists formed several new charities to provide assistance to needy youths.[25]

After the Civil War reformers, concerned that earlier efforts to deal with the problem--putting dependent children in almshouses, houses of refuge and orphanages or placing them out of the city as Charles Loring Brace did--had not kept pace with the rising tide of dependent children. The response was to create more institutions.

In 1851 there were 77 orphanages in the country. By 1880 there were over 600 housing more than 50,000 inmates. One reason for the increase was that the volunteer social workers of the period had concluded that asylums and other institutions housing adults were no place for dependent children. The orphanages thus created

> were designed to rescue needy youngsters from wicked urban haunts, and to teach them to be obedient, neat, and quiet. Of course, since every orphanage was a live-in asylum, its training program was much more all-encompassing than that of any grammar school. Orphans generally wore uniforms, slept in large dormitories, all in identical beds, and spent what little time they had outside of the classroom doing household chores or performing military drills.[26]

Like the other agencies we have been discussing, then, orphanages represented a mixture of social control and compassion.

Interestingly poverty among children, which was thought to be an equivalent social ill along with juvenile crime, usually came under the auspices of private rather than public organizations while the reverse

was true for crime. Late in the nineteenth century those private organizations sought to make their activities more "scientific" and more effective. The lasting result was the professionalization of social work, but, according to Ronald Cohen these earnest volunteers developed the main themes of the child-saving movement:

> broken and inadequate families, health, delinquency, morality, poverty, schooling, dependency and neglect, employment, discrimination, adolescence, recreation and play, and early child development. Adults worried about children--everyone's children, not just their own--for their own sake and also out of fear for the country's future. They also wanted to control them.[27]

The people who made up the child-saving movement, which included the juvenile justice reformers, likewise had mixed motives. In a work still in press LeRoy Ashby reminds us that in spite of the heavy emphasis on social control motivation in this period many of the reformers were genuinely concerned about children and about helping them to a better life and a brighter future.[28] Susan Tiffin strikes an appealing balance:

> The men and women who agitated for child welfare reform were mainly middle-class, native born, urban based professionals. . . . The stable society they wished to ensure was one that was conducive to their own social and career aspiration. They did not wish a radical redistribution of wealth nor a basic restructuring of social relationships. . . . at the same time they were also genuinely concerned about the plight of an unfortunate group of children.[29]

The Major transformation of child-saving was not so much in what was done as who did it. Before 1900 much of the work was done by volunteers

or by salaried employees. After the turn of the century professionals became the norm. With the new people came "theories, organizations, programs (both public and private), institutions hordes of individual reformers, and the like, all designed to assist and accommodate children to the dizzying pace of social, economic, and political change."[30]

Before the age of industry and the city. Child saving in all its manifestations was a fairly informal affair. The community handled its own problems usually through the families concerned. But with the rise of the primary individual and the corresponding development of the concept of individual privacy, the informal approach gave way to institution building. Institutions appeared in response to perceived threats and relatively straightforward social theories. Schools would inculcated appropriate social values--especially among the children of immigrants. Reformatories would re-form the characters of wayward young people. Orphanages would replace lost families and prepare their young charges to enter a competitive, urban world. Placing out, apprenticeship, probation and foster care would replicate the pre-industrial approaches to social problems and make formal the old informal systems. But these simple approaches did not appear to be stemming the rising tide of social misery suffered by children and so late in the century the entire system was transformed. The results included a seven-fold remaking of the schools, the professionalization of social work, the founding of the juvenile court, the creation of a

federal Children's Bureau, the definition and virtual elimination of a new social problem--child labor--and the founding of national concern about the lives of future citizens.

Recently, historians have increased their understanding of these happenings many times over. Not quite fifty years ago Grace Abbott in her pioneering Child and the State called attention to the richness of the history of childhood in America. Since then a host of books and articles has appeared and they have vastly increased our knowledge of children in the past. In the period under discussion, I would hazard the guess that more had been added to our fund of knowledge in the past ten years than in all the rest of the time put together. What has caused this outpouring of research and writing includes the development of new techniques for learning about inarticulate peoples, the increasing interest in ethnic history and women's history, the continued fertility of the history of education as a research field, and the existence of a lively and continuing debate among scholars over the meaning of the events they describe. I have no doubt that the process will continue.

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